

Dear Friends:

Several wrote that they liked my mimeographed Christmas letter and urged me to go on mimeographing more often. This has one advantage: at least I can send replies to letters which I would not otherwise be able to answer. I am once again forced to keep down letters to a minimum. First of all Lent is close -- Easter is early this year. Then my publisher fondly imagines that I am working on a book for which I have signed a contract, so I had better get busy on it. For three months I have not been able to do anything with this manuscript because I have been bombarded with requests for other things -- articles, statements, and so on, plus correspondence. Now I want to concentrate on my true work for a while. And of course live my life. Hence another mimeograph. I hope those who did not know about this, and who expected a personal reply, will have the kindness to understand.

It is a cloudy quiet Sunday morning, not too cold. I am hoping for some rain to fill my rain barrels and give me water to wash dishes with. I still have enough to wash out the coffee pot for another three or four days. I bring drinking water from the monastery daily in a gallon bottle. I know what it means to save on water, and I guess I use only two or three gallons a day for everything, at the hermitage. (Showers I take at the monastery).

There has been a lot of talk about Fr. Charles Davis and his farewell to the Church. Note, his problem was Church authority, not celibacy. He could conceivably have left the priesthood and got married with a dispensation. In a long statement which was front page news in England he made some very drastic criticisms of the abuse of authority in the Church. I do not think these criticisms were altogether baseless or unjust. The present institutional structure of the Church is certainly too antiquated, too baroque, and is often in practice unjust, inhuman, arbitrary and even absurd in its functioning. It sometimes imposes useless and intolerable burdens on the human person and demands outrageous sacrifices, often with no better result than to maintain a rigid system in its rigidity and to keep the same abuses established, one might think, until kingdom come. I certainly respect Fr Davis's anguish -- who of us does not sometimes share it? But I cannot follow him in his conclusion that the institutional Church has now reached the point where it can hardly be anything other than dishonest, tyrannical, mendacious and inhuman. He feels he has a moral obligation to leave the Church and he offers this theological justification for his decision.

I hope most of us Catholics have learned by now that this kind of decision on the part of one of our brothers, merits our compassion and understanding, not fulminations against heresy and bad faith. One can feel Fr. Davis is still a brother without coming to the same conclusions as he did.

I have in fact just been reading Romano Guardini's excellent little book on Pascal. He analyzes the "demon of combativeness" in Pascal -- a demon which is no prerogative of Jansenists. At times one wonders if a certain combativeness is not endemic in Catholicism: a "compulsion to be always right" and to prove the adversary wrong. A compulsion which easily leads to witch hunting and which, when turned the wrong way, hunts its witches in the Church herself and finally needs to find them in Rome. There are always human failures which can be exploited for this purpose. Pascal nearly went over the falls completely but he recognized the destructiveness of his own inner demon in time, and knew enough to be silent and to believe and to love. The story of his death is very moving.

There comes a time when it is no longer important to prove one's point, but simply to live, to surrender to God and to love. There have been bad days when I might have considered doing what Fr Davis has done. In actual fact I have never seriously considered leaving the Church, and though the question of leaving the monastic state has presented itself, I was not able to take it seriously for more than five or ten minutes. It is true that if I had at one time or other left the Church I would have found scores of friends who would have approved my action and declared it honest and courageous. I do not claim any special merit in having decided otherwise. Nor does a decision for Christian obedience imply an admission



that I think authority has always been infallibly just, reasonable or human. Being a Catholic and being a monk have not always been easy. But I know that I owe too much to the Church and to Christ for me to be able to take these other things seriously. The absurdity, the prejudice, the rigidity and unreasonableness one encounters in some Catholics are nothing whatever when placed in the balance with the grace, love and infinite mercy of Christ in His Church. And after all, am I not arrogant too? Am I not unreasonable, unfair, demanding, suspicious and often quite arbitrary in my dealings with others? The point is not just "who is right?" but "judge not" and "forgive one another" and "bear one another's burdens." This by no means implies passive obsequiousness and blind obedience, but a willingness to listen, to be patient, and to keep working to help the Church change and renew herself from within. This is our task. Therefore by God's grace I remain a Catholic, a monk and a hermit. I have made commitments which are unconditional and cannot be taken back. I do not regard this position as especially courageous: it is just the ordinary stuff of life, the acceptance of limits which we must all accept in one way or another: the acceptance of a sphere in which one is called to love, trust and believe and pray -- and meet those whom one is destined to meet and love.

More and more I see the meaning of my relationship with all of you, and the value of the love that unites us, usually unexpressed. This is the area in which the term union in Christ really means most to me, though some of you are not enrolled in my Church.

More and more since living alone I have wanted to stop fighting, and arguing, and proclaiming and criticizing. I think the points on which protest has been demanded of me and given by me are now well enough known. Obviously there may be other such situations in the future. In a world like ours -- a world of war, riot, murder, racism, tyranny and established banditry, one has to be able to stand up and say NO. But there are also other things to do. I am more and more convinced of the reality of my own job which is meditation and study and prayer in silence. I do not intend to give up writing, that too is obviously my vocation. But I hope I will be able to give up controversy some day. Pray for me. When one gets older (Jan. 31 is my fifty second birthday) one realizes the futility of a life wasted in argument when it should be given entirely to love.

God bless you. I really appreciate your letters. When there are really urgent questions and problems in them, I will always do my level best to answer. Please understand that my visits are severely limited and I cannot possibly even think of seeing more than a few of the people who ask to see me. But there is such a thing as being united in prayer, or even thought and desire (if you can't pray) and in our friendship. The main thing is that we desire good for each other and seek within the limits of our power to obtain for each other what we desire.

Cordially yours in Christ,

Thomas Merton.

P.S. For those who have not been in touch with developments here: I have been living more or less as a hermit for several years. The dividing line between "less" and "more" came in the fall of 1964 when I began spending the night in the hermitage. Living there day and night became "official" in August 1965. My latest book: Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander Doubleday (November 1966). The next one Mystics and Zen Masters (Farran Straus and Giroux - March 1967). New Directions will publish two paperbacks of mine in 1967 - a new Selected Poems and Wisdom of the Desert.